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KEEPING IT (UN)REAL

SCI-FI MASTER NEIL GAIMAN
MEETS THE GORILLAZ, THE WORLD'S
GREATEST LIVE, PRE-RECORDED,
RE-MIXED, ALL-ANIMATED POP BAND.



WHEN THEY CAME

up with the idea for Gorillaz, Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett wrote a manifesto. It fit on a single sheet of paper, but they've since lost it and wish they could remember what it said.

Not that it matters – Gorillaz is a virtual band. It doesn't quite exist. Its four members (2D, Murdoc Niccals, Russel Hobbs, and Noodle), designed and drawn by Hewlett, are fictional. The group inhabits Kong Studios, high on a mountain in Essex, northeast of London. There are no mountains in Essex. The band exists enough to make music, to produce videos, to remix, and to be remixed.

Albarn (music) and Hewlett (art) are the spirit behind Gorillaz. Their first outing, five years ago, remixed the whole idea of what a band could be. The iconography was grabbed from everywhere – sci-fi, anime, rock videos – while the music was a hip hop-based cut-and-paste of poppy melodies, old horror movie themes, and any sonic style available. The debut album, *Gorillaz*, sold an impressive 6 million copies worldwide, making it the most successful album ever by a virtual group. For good measure, Albarn and Hewlett released the music in four versions – an original; two sets of remixes; and a DVD with accompanying animation, interactive games, and performance videos.

The band's new disc, *Demon Days*, is like the first one – only more so. Coproduced by remix icon Danger Mouse, it includes a children's choir and a fable narrated by Dennis Hopper. And its obscenely catchy songs take up permanent residence in the back of your mind.

I caught up with Albarn and Hewlett for a rare behind-the-curtain interview. We met in West London's Notting Hill, where dozens of cultures collide. Hewlett arrived first, unshaven, with a foxy grin. He created the *Tank Girl* comic more than 15 years ago. His drawing style is street-smart, cynical, brilliant, funny. His studio, located beneath a highway overpass, is called *Zombie Flesh Eaters*.

Albarn turned up next: only marginally less unshaven, with intense, almost luminous, eyes. He hit fame in the early '90s as the lead singer of Britpop band Blur.

It's raining, and the three of us are at the back of a café done up in pink and purple stripes, sitting slightly too close for comfort.



Toon in, turn on, rock out: The author (far left) mixes it up with virtual bandmates Albarn and Hewlett.

GAIMAN: How did Gorillaz come about?

HEWLETT: We were flatmates. One day, we were home watching MTV with our eyes just kind of glazed. Because if you watch MTV for too long, it's a bit like hell – there's nothing of substance there. So we got this idea for a cartoon band, something that would be a comment on that.

ALBARN: We're the generation whose stars come from *Pop Idol* and celebrity-wrestling shows. And it's all a bit like a cartoon, really.

One of the delights of Gorillaz is that it grabs ideas from everywhere. What's the motivation for that?

ALBARN: More and more, cultural groups are cross-pollinating, and we're getting much more interesting art as a result. Being in Blur has allowed me to travel and hear the music that's being made all over the world. On one song on *Demon Days*, you can hear that I pulled in some reggae elements and added a touch of Latin music. Then at the end, a Glen Campbell-style orchestra comes in.

HEWLETT: The coolest thing is that kids are catching the references we put in the music and the visuals, and then they're going out to learn about the original pieces of culture

we were inspired by. The payoff is that the next generation of artists and writers might say, "I learned a lot from listening to the Gorillaz when I was 15."

ALBARN: If I hadn't spent all those years learning how to play instruments, I'd be using a sampler to put all these pieces together. Instead, I use a songwriting method that's a lot like sampling without actually digitally sampling. Gorillaz is how I take everything I hear and filter it. It's been really helpful having Danger Mouse onboard for that aspect of it. He's an exceptional American. [Laughs.]

I love the idea of his *Grey Album* – the conceit of mixing such disparate sources.

ALBARN: It was perfect, wasn't it? It's what I love about the crazy process of making music – the moments like that. It was just such a great idea. Danger Mouse is now working on a bunch of other records, translating his ideas about remixing into all sorts of other projects.

HEWLETT: And he does it like a young Jimi Hendrix.

ALBARN: [Laughs.] And he looks the part as well. It's really exciting to find like minds.

Gorillaz seems to have gone from small indie band to huge supergroup. It's as if the Archies had stayed together and turned into the Beach Boys.

ALBARN: Well, we see it this way: Gorillaz shouldn't be denied any of the affectations of genuine rock stars just because they're cartoons. They've been very successful, so now they have more money and they can make bigger, more grandiose videos.

The paradox is that by being completely artificial, Gorillaz is a lot less artificial than a boy band or any of these other constructed entities we're all used to.

HEWLETT: Exactly. If you're going to pretend to be somebody you're not – which is the whole point of being a rock star – then why not just invent fake characters and have them do it all for you?

ALBARN: I hope we can keep doing it this way – making music and art that are pure products of our influences while not really having to let the whole celebrity side of it get in the way. Then maybe more virtual

*Neil Gaiman is the author of *American Gods* and creator of the *Sandman* comic series.*

bands will come out and do the same thing. And then hopefully there will be so many of us that people will ask themselves, What in the world is going on here? We're buying magazines full of cartoons!

You redesigned the characters for *Demon Days*. You can actually see a progression.

ALBARN: That was important because the characters were dated. They needed updating.

HEWLETT: The idea was to break some of the rules of animation. You know, cartoon characters aren't really supposed to change over time.

ALBARN: The alternative would have been to add Scrappy-Doo to the band.

HEWLETT: Ah, that would have been great! But my version of Scrappy-Doo would be really annoying. Way more annoying than the real Scrappy-Doo ever was, and he would sing just like the Chipmunks.

You're paying homage through imagery from lots of different cultures.

ALBARN: Yes. I came back with lots of inspiration from Mongolia. There was one moment in particular that inspired some of the darker elements of *Demon Days*. I bought lots of old Betty Boop cartoons with really bad, aggressive Chinese overdubs and watched them with my daughter on a train traveling through Northern China. The area is utterly destroyed by all the farming – there was a 200-mile stretch where all the trees were dead. The scene felt totally apocalyptic.

HEWLETT: I took a lot of influences from Studio Ghibli, which is the Japanese animation studio that made *Spirited Away* and *Castle in the Sky*. They're like the Japanese version of Disney – but without all the schmaltz. They make beautiful films that are also a bit dark, which is how I want Gorillaz animation to turn out. Another influence was the knockoff art that you see in Mexico. They've got such an eye for color and design there. I love it.

ALBARN: South America really embraced us last time. I went to one of the open-air markets, and there were loads of paintings of the Gorillaz characters for sale. It was really cool.

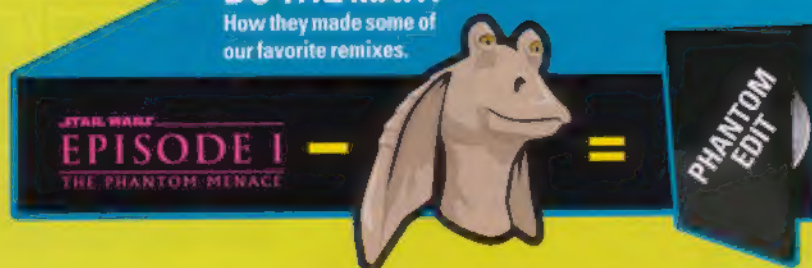
Sure, because you knew you'd made it then. It's like you knew *The Simpsons* had made it when you saw all that knockoff Bart stuff.

HEWLETT: Yeah, there were paintings of Murdoc as Wolverine right there along with Homer Simpson as King Kong. The fake merchandise we saw on that tour was better than our own stuff. We went out and bought a bunch of it.

You also seem inspired by horror movie imagery. Why are there so many zombies in your videos?

DO THE MATH

How they made some of our favorite remixes.



ALBARN: Well, because everybody on TV's a fucking zombie, right? I mean, watch a 50 Cent video where he's in the middle of a club, and he's just surrounded by zombies. The Gorillaz cartoons seem more real to me than the actual people on TV. Because at least you know that there's some intelligence behind the cartoons, and there's a lot of work that's gone into it, so it can't all be just a lie.

HEWLETT: Yeah, I'm much more at home

with Daffy Duck than I am with a real person. But the whole zombie thing is an obsession of mine. I love zombie films. Once, I looked out the window where I work and realized that everybody was walking around in circles with their mobile phones attached to their heads – it reminded me of that scene from *Dawn of the Dead* in the car lot. That was a big inspiration.

ALBARN: These are the seeds of the future, aren't they? You need to identify them. ■ ■ ■

MAKING OF A REMIX: Robot Chicken

Action Figure Meets Sketch Comedy



Is that really Dubya suited up to fight asteroids in *Armageddon*? Or Batman and Robin, the Dukes of Hazzard, and Vin Diesel on the same raceway in *Cannonball Run*? They're action figures, modded and stop-motion animated in Cartoon Network's weekly laff riot *Robot Chicken*. Here's how creators Seth Green and Matthew Senreich puree TV history. – Ted Greenwald

1. Writing The show's four writers gather in Green's living room, emerging with a script that includes a dozen or more sketches. They submit the script to an army of attorneys, who make sure it meets the legal standard for parody. The lawyers' requests can be baffling. Says Green: "Once we had a conversation about the difference between someone getting their neck snapped and their throat slit."

2. Dubbing Recording voice-overs comes next. Green, whose Hollywood credits include playing Dr. Evil's son in *Austin Powers*, goes about casting as though he were throwing a party: "We sit around thinking, Who do we want to play with?" So far, the guest list has included Scarlett Johansson, Ashton Kutcher, and Rachael Leigh Cook.

3. Construction *Robot Chicken* employs a full-time "toy wrangler," whose sole task is to procure plastic effigies on a moment's notice. Still, most action figures aren't active enough. "They don't have sufficient range of motion," Green explains. So the team's eight puppet builders modify some dolls and construct others from scratch, while eight set builders are busy working on backgrounds.

4. Animation Fourteen animators bring the script to life on 14 separate stages, all operating at once. The animators ready the set, pose the characters, position a hi-res digital camera, and snap video frames one at a time. Production goal: 10 seconds of animation per stage per day.

5. Postproduction After stringing the sketches together, Green and Senreich edit the pieces into a 15-minute whole. "If we have a joke that needs a bit of time to tell, we have to decide whether to save a different clip for the DVD," Green says. When the cut is just right, it's time to add the finishing touches: sound effects and music.

STUDENT ENROLLMENT SHEET

INSTRUCTOR

Kirby

CLASS

Scanning | 0 |

HOUR/DAY

24/7

1961 11 26 54 J. 208 1913

- MAKE DARK MARKS
- ERASE COMPLETELY TO CHANGE
- EX. 

420

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SCAN**

DCP
DIGITAL COMICS
PRESERVATION

→ FEED THIS DIRECTION

M.1

IRON

SCAN

CODE

KO